

THE AULD GREY TOWN

It's often passed by people speeding along the A591 towards Lakeland. Some may glance down to the right, wonder what it's like, but they're focussed on fells and lakes and have no time to stop.

It's worth a diversion to look round the "Auld Grey Town", so called because of the many limestone buildings. Like most places, Kendal is full of interest for the visitor with an inclination to exploration. I began my wandering at the southern end of town in Kirkland which in fact was only fully absorbed into Kendal as recently as 1908, Blind Beck marking the former boundary. The district took its name from the parish church, dedicated to the Holy Trinity and a place of worship since the 13th century. Enlarged over time, it has become one of the widest parish churches in the country but, in common with many these days, it was unfortunately locked on my visit.

Very much "on tap" for church visitors is the Ring o' Bells pub and also nearby are the Abbot Hall art gallery and Museum of Lakeland Life. Abbot Hall was built in 1759 for Colonel George Wilson who wanted the best of both worlds - a town house with the atmosphere of a country mansion. Set among lawns and surrounded by trees next to the River Kent which gives the town its name, the Colonel was granted his wish.

The art gallery houses many paintings in beautiful original frames complementing the fine Gillow furniture, pride of place going to George Romney who, although born in Dalton, lived much of his early life in Kendal. He was considered the greatest rival of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy, and he specialised in portraits. Another relatively local lad, John Ruskin of Coniston, also has paintings there and there is modern art to see in addition to changing touring exhibitions.

The Museum of Lakeland Life shows a bygone age when, before good transport links had been established, the district was remote and inaccessible. Recreated rooms give a flavour of what life was really like. The work of Arthur Ransome, of "Swallows and Amazons" fame, also features and, like at the Abbot Hall, there is a wide variety of changing displays through the year.

A walk up Highgate took me to the town centre. The white posts outside the Highgate Hotel cite Kendal exactly; London is 258 miles distant, Edinburgh 135. A feature of Highgate is its many cobbled yards leading off, one of which leads to the old theatre, opened in 1829. However, it was closed five years later after opposition from Quakers, Presbyterians and Temperance groups.

Past the imposing town hall wherein is found the tourist information office is the bustling market place where an open market is held twice a week as well as a monthly farmers' market featuring the best of local produce. An impressive war memorial stands where, in mediaeval times, a row of houses stood. Leaving the market place, I went down cobbled Branthwaite Brow to find the Chocolate House dating from 1657 where the smiling assistants in period costume offer a friendly greeting. Also available is chocolate - loads of the stuff; it's a veritable paradise for those with a sweet tooth. The establishment combines a shop, restaurant and informative "chocolate attraction".

Moving on, I took the footbridge across the river, wide and quite fast flowing, in search of Kendal Castle. Passing the ski slope I climbed wooden steps through the trees and a grass slope, slippery after a slight frost, led to the ruined castle with its fine view of the town from the North West Tower, also known as the Troutbeck Tower. From here the site of the original castle at Castle Howe, clearly marked by a column, can be seen across town.

The castle was built in the early 13th century and it passed to the Parr family via marriage in 1383. The family's best known member was Katherine, Henry VIII's queen who outlived him. We must rely on pictures to show what the castle may have looked like in its heyday for it has been in a state of decay for over 400 years. I found the ruins of the Manor Hall, the centre for the administration and defence of Kendal, the most imposing part.

I discovered my mild scramble to the castle hadn't been necessary; there is a far easier way up, appropriately from the end of Parr Street. I'll know next time.

Crossing the river again, a walk through pleasant gardens brought me back to Kirkgate. Refreshment time! Not unexpectedly, there is a wide choice of watering holes and eating places; international cuisine (one such location for this - *deja vu* - being recommended in the "Which" food guide), cosy tea rooms and traditional pubs abound. My favourite is Farrers on Stricklandgate, the main thoroughfare near the market place. This fine establishment was founded in 1819 although the building itself dates back to 1640 and was formerly the Waggon and Horses, a pack horse inn. I enjoy its olde worlde charm and I always make a purchase from the extensive range of teas and coffees (one of which I am enjoying even as I write this).

It is popular - when I was there I had to queue with shoppers taking a break from enjoying Kendal's blend of well known high street names and traditional shops found in the Westmorland Shopping Centre and enclaves such as Elephant Yard and Blackhall Yard. The town enjoys its status as arguably South Cumbria's premier shopping location with the K Village featuring eleven retail outlets just to the south of the centre adding to the attraction.

I don't find the hustle and bustle of the town overpowering, but if an escape is needed the low fells nearby can oblige. Just past Oxenholme Station, which provides a way into the National Park for travellers on the West Coast mainline, begins a benign stroll up the Helm. Starting from the Station Inn, a gentle ridge walk gives views of Morecambe Bay to the south, the Lakeland Fells to the west and the Howgill Fells to the east. When I was there on a beautiful early winter's day, the fells looked magnificent with their dusting of snow.

The town has a number of delightful places to visit close by such as the Fairy Steps, a lovely ramble near Milnthorpe, and, a little further towards North Lancashire, the Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with its many glorious walks of varying length is within easy reach. One of the town's advantages, of course, is its position, surrounded by lovely countryside prominent in which is Low Sizergh Barn with its craft gallery, farm trail, shop selling the freshest possible produce and tea room from which, if you are there about 3.30 in the afternoon, you can look down on all the action in the milking parlour.

I was lucky enough to be able to solicit the views of Hilary, local resident and friend who introduced me to the delights of the Helm. "Kendal has a lot going for it," she said. "Gateway to the Lakes, handy for the coast and there's everything you need with good shops and friendly people." She is impressed by the entertainment available, such as the orchestras which play at the Leisure Centre, and the programmes offered by the Brewery Arts Centre where Lancashire entertainers such as Ken Dodd and the Houghton Weavers have played. She told me about September's torchlight procession, the music festival and the agricultural shows which confirm Kendal's position at the heart of a farming community.

She's not always lived in Kendal, but she's pleased she is there now. It's very easy to see why.